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Wetland users say no to cleanup

By Brent Israelsen
The Salt Lake Tribune

A plan to remove contaminants from a Salt Lake County aquifer and discharge them into the Jordan River is spawning a pool of criticism downstream.

Water users and duck-hunting clubs in the last reaches of the river have complained to a state lawmaker, who has placed the issue on a legislative committee's agenda next month.

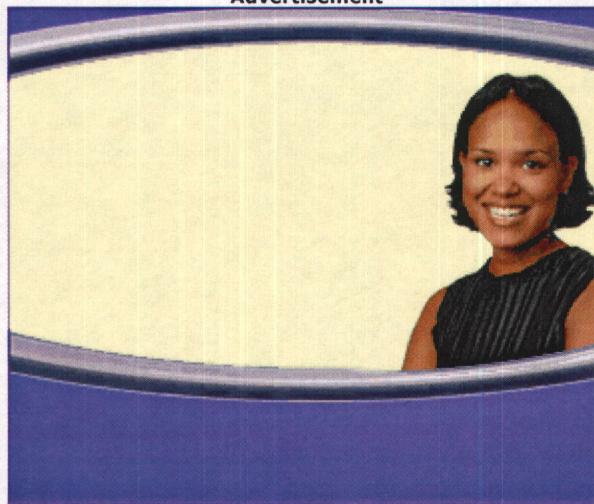
Among the new opponents of the plan is Lynn H. Jensen, water commissioner of the lower Jordan River, who worries the discharge will harm water quality in the wetlands of the Great Salt Lake.

Jensen also is perturbed he was not notified of the cleanup plan, which was highly touted last month by Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, President Bush's choice to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

"No one up here has heard of it," said Jensen, who oversees diversions from the river between 2100 South and Farmington Bay of the Great Salt Lake.

He said he learned of the plan in a Sept. 13 story in The Salt Lake Tribune, which noted that the cleanup plan would result in the annual discharge of 20,000 tons of salts and 146 pounds of selenium into the river near 2100 South.

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The idea of adding more pollutants to an already dirty river system is galling to Jensen, who says the Great Salt Lake wetlands should be protected from further degradation.

"If we do not find a better way, these wetlands will become an EPA Superfund cleanup in the years to come," Jensen wrote in a letter this week to Dianne Nielson, director of the Utah Department of Environmental Quality.

DEQ announced the plan

Sept. 2 after years of study and negotiations with Kennecott Utah Copper Corp., which was responsible for two plumes of polluted groundwater in southern Salt Lake County.

One of the plumes sits below South Jordan. The plan calls for the Jordan Water

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wetlands," said Ostler. "There are perceptions but no presentation of data."

A discharge permit issued to Jordan Valley earlier this year limits how much salt and selenium can be dumped into the river.

That permit will ensure that selenium concentrations never exceed 4.22 parts per billion (ppb), well below the current EPA standard of 5 ppb. It also will ensure that salts, known as "total dissolved solids," stay below the EPA standard of 1,200 ppb, said division scientist Bill Moellmer.

Ostler said most of those pollutants would flow through the wetlands and into the Great Salt Lake without harming the environment.

"The permit's been written to protect fresh water, and the wetlands are fresh water," Ostler said.

But Jensen and some duck hunters are not convinced.

They have contacted state Rep. Brent Goodfellow, D-West Valley City, who brought the matter to the attention of the Legislative Management Committee. The committee is scheduled to explore the matter in its Nov. 18 meeting, Goodfellow said. Were the committee not to be satisfied by DEQ's explanation, it could recommend legislation to block the agency from implementing the plan, which proponents hope to see fully functional by 2009.

The downstream Jordan River interests join the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Salt Lake City Public Utilities Department in questioning the wisdom of the groundwater cleanup plan.

They argue it would be more prudent to pipe contaminants to Kennecott's gigantic tailings ponds near Magna rather than discharge them into the river.

Noting the discharge permit expires in five years, Ostler said any indication of environmental degradation could result in changes to the permit, including a requirement that the contaminants be disposed of elsewhere.



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